

Bristol Bay Road Considered

Alaska Governor Frank Murkowski recently announced the state’s intention, in partnership with Bristol Bay Native Corporation, to open up state and Native corporation lands in the Alaska Peninsula to leasing for oil and gas exploration and development. The state is considering a new road development on the Alaska Peninsula that would over time connect communities between King Salmon and Chignik, while providing access to areas licensed or leased for energy exploration and development.

The administration estimates that potential revenue from the sale of oil and gas leases will more than pay for the \$285 million gravel road. A road crossing the Naknek River would complete an important segment of the overall highway project.

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Alaska Department of
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Schedule

09/15/03 Public Meetings,
Naknek/S. Naknek

12/22/03 Release report for
public comment

03/12/04 Present final report

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Project Website

www.dot.state.ak.us/stwdplng/
projectinfo/proj_master.html

Naknek Crossing Intermodal Economic Impact



and Airport Use Study

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The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities is examining a potential crossing of the Naknek River. This project is entitled the “Naknek Crossing Intermodal Economic Impact and Airport Use Study.” A planning team headed by Northern Economics, Inc. of Anchorage has been hired by the Department to evaluate and recommend regional transportation alternatives.

This study was recommended in the Southwest Alaska Transportation Plan, released in November 2002, which indicated the Naknek crossing may be desirable for safety, access, economic development and cost concerns.

The proposed crossing would entail a bridge spanning the Naknek River and connecting the three communities of the Bristol Bay Borough. A bridge would influence aviation use-patterns, as well as the priority of aviation operations and improvements at individual airport facilities, some of which are already identified and awaiting funding. The bridge alternative being examined

would include trade-offs in transportation, such as the Department relinquishing ownership of one or both of the smaller airports at Naknek and South Naknek, while improving King Salmon airport’s capacity for general aviation operations. The multi-modal needs study will define the appropriate level of transportation investment, and examine the distribution of costs and benefits among various interests. The study’s aim is to compare the future costs and benefits of a highway crossing to those of improved airports.

The Alaska Department of Transportation has studied this issue over the last several years. The Department is committed to a good regional solution, and is now restricting expenditure of airport improvement funds for Naknek, South Naknek, and King Salmon pending the outcomes of this study. The results of this study will provide the information to guide sound future investments in transportation and economic development for the region. Input from the Bristol Bay communities is a critical element in those decisions.

Summary of Public Meetings Comments

On 17 and 18 June 2003, representatives of the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (ADOT&PF), the Federal Aviation Administration, and a team of consultants led by Northern Economics held public meetings in Naknek and South Naknek to discuss the current transportation system and a proposed bridge crossing of the Naknek River.

For this study, ADOT&PF is studying transportation in the Bristol Bay Borough as a system, rather than as individual facilities. The major components of the current transportation system in the Bristol Bay Borough consist of:

- A jet-capable airport at King Salmon
- A recently improved gravel airfield at South Naknek
- A gravel airfield at Naknek
- A float plane base at Nornak Lake, adjacent to the Naknek airfield
- A paved highway between King Salmon and Naknek

Other aviation activity occurs at Tibbets Field, located near the Naknek airport, and floatplane activity occurs on the Naknek River near the King Salmon Airport. Local road networks exist in each community.

Airport operators and users in the Borough expressed the following concerns about air transportation in the area:

- Closure of the King Salmon air traffic control tower could affect the capacity and safety of that airport.
- Operations at Naknek Airport are important to the region because it is located near shopping, services, recreation, and the school system. 70 or more aircraft are parked there, partly due to better wind protection than other airports in the area.
- South Naknek students need safe transportation to school in Naknek.
- Naknek Airport needs safety upgrades, and South Naknek Airport needs surface repair.
- The timing of airport improvements and/or potential airport closures is critical; there needs to be an interim plan before any new transportation facilities are constructed 10 or more years from now.



The following paragraphs summarize other key points raised in those meetings.

The current transportation system increases the cost of living and operating businesses in South Naknek. In the summer, people and cargo use air taxi services, skiffs, and barges for traveling between South Naknek, and Naknek or King Salmon. In the winter, after sufficient ice thickness is achieved, people can drive snowmachines and vehicles across the river, or use air taxi services. The roundtrip airfare for an individual traveling between Naknek and South Naknek is \$60 if traveling alone, and the one-way cost to move a car by barge in the summer is \$500. The transportation costs affect a number of organizations. For example, parents of South Naknek students that attend Naknek schools are flown to parent-teacher conferences at school district expense. South Naknek emergency services personnel pay for their own travel costs to attend training in Naknek or King Salmon.

In addition to the high transportation costs imposed on South Naknek residents and businesses by this transportation system, safety is a primary issue. The school district has been flying South Naknek junior high and high school students to Naknek schools for 30 years. One winter a plane had mechanical problems and landed on the river ice. A similar situation during times when ice is not present could have dramatic consequences for the community. The concern about safety is always present in the minds of South Naknek parents whose children fly on a daily basis.

The school charters impose other costs as well. For example, the school flights operate under visual flight rules in daylight only. In mid-winter this results in children arriving at school at 9:45 a.m., 45 minutes after school commences. The requirement to fly during daylight hours also constrains the ability of South Naknek students to participate in after-school activities. At times bad weather will result in students not being able to return home. On those days the school district incurs costs for housing students in private homes on the north side of the river.

Emergency services are also affected by bad weather. There is concern in the community about the ability of medical evacuation flights during bad weather to transport people that may need immediate medical care. The majority of emergency services personnel in the Bristol Bay Borough are located on the north side of the river and the present transportation system hinders their ability to support or assist their counterparts in South Naknek.

The present transportation system requires the Bristol Bay Borough and a number of other agencies to maintain separate facilities on both sides of the Naknek River. With a bridge available it is anticipated that a number of facilities would be consolidated with subsequent savings to local, state, and federal government budgets, and the possibility of lower local tax rates or improved services if redundant facilities do not need to be maintained. Residents mentioned a

number of facilities that are potential candidates for consolidation. These included the post office, health clinic, landfill, emergency services, and the library.

South Naknek residents also believe that a bridge would stimulate economic development in the community and offer new business opportunities, resulting in new jobs that would offset any losses from consolidation. Among the businesses mentioned were a gas station, restaurants, boat haulout and repair, and tourism-related businesses. None of the fish processing plants located in South Naknek are

processing at this time and it is believed that a bridge will lower operating costs for these facilities and result in some of them reopening. A reopened plant or plants would also make ice available for setnet fishers whose sites are located south of the Naknek River, which would improve the quality of fish harvested in the area. This is very important as the Alaska wild salmon industry faces continuing competition from farmed salmon.

A focus on the Bristol Bay and Kodiak region conclusions statement.

“As a result of these studies the District Engineer concludes that the economic development of Southwestern Alaska will derive from its strategic position in the defense of North America and from its principal basic natural resources of fish, minerals, hydroelectric power and recreation. Any improvement of rivers and harbors which may be constructed to aid in the development of these resources will contribute to the welfare of all Alaska and to the United States.”

